

KEY ISSUE BRIEF

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GENETICALLY MODIFIED WHEAT

Issue

Although regulation of genetically modified (GM) wheat trials includes thorough risk assessment and containment conditions, the government is aware of consumer concerns about GM wheat trials in Australia. In July 2011 Greenpeace Australia Pacific released *Australia's wheat scandal*, a report calling for government to ban field trials of GM wheat. Two Greenpeace activists have been charged in relation to vandalism of a GM wheat trial crop (DIR 093) on a CSIRO site in Canberra on 14 July 2011.

Talking Points

- Regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and genetically modified foods is a matter for the Health portfolio, which includes the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ).
 - All dealings with live and viable GMOs, including cultivation of GM trial crops in Australia are regulated by the Gene Technology Regulator under the *Gene Technology Act 2000*.
 - The Regulator assesses each licence application to grow GMOs and will only issue licences if any risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment.
 - To date, the Regulator has approved 11 small GM wheat research trials after conducting a rigorous science-based risk assessment and extensive consultation.
 - The trials are for research purposes only and are subject to strict containment conditions, including a requirement to monitor the trial sites after harvest and destroy any remaining material.
 - There has been no breach of containment for any GM wheat trials and wheat from these trials cannot enter the human or animal food supplies.
 - Each trial is limited in size and duration and current licences have established trial sites ranging in size from 0.1 to 2 hectares per year for up to five years.
 - GM wheat is not grown commercially in Australia nor have there been any applications submitted to the Regulator to grow GM wheat commercially. GM wheat is not commercially grown anywhere in the world.
 - The government considers that gene technology can play an important part in dealing with emerging challenges, including pressure on global food supplies.
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Key Facts

- The Gene Technology Regulator has approved 11 small scale trial sites for testing GM wheat cultivation in Australia since 2005. These licences have been issued to the University of Adelaide, CSIRO and the Victoria Department of Primary Industries.

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- CSIRO has permission (under DIR 093) to conduct controlled nutritional trials in animals and humans with GM wheat modified to have improved nutritional properties.
- Greenpeace maintain that GM wheat is unsafe, uneconomical and that trials could contaminate the food supply. Greenpeace also stated that CSIRO would be commercialising GM wheat in the next two years, with GM wheat products to be present in the food chain by 2015.
- The government has not publically responded to the Greenpeace reports. However many of the claims made by Greenpeace against GM wheat have since been contested by industry experts and the scientific community.
- Before commercialisation is possible, GM wheat will continue to undergo rigorous scientific analysis and commercial testing and it is expected commercialisation is seven to 10 years away.
- International trading partners have also sought information of the department, to confirm Australia is not growing GM wheat commercially and that Australia's non-GM exports are free from any contamination with GM.
- The Greens party support a moratorium on the release of GMOs into the environment until there is an adequate scientific understanding of their long term impact on the environment, and human and animal health. They also call for a strengthened, transparent, precautionary regulatory and monitoring system which prevents GMO contamination.

Background

- Recent media on this issue follows on from the Greenpeace report '*Spliced Bread: GE wheat coming to a store near you*' in October 2010 and related media articles in March, May and June 2011.
- On 16 June 2011 Greenpeace Australia released on their "true food" website an article stating GM wheat would be entering the food chain in Australia by 2015, entitled '*GM wheat planted, on shelves by 2015 says Government*'.
- This article named CSIRO as the government source for the claim. CSIRO fact sheet on the GM wheat trials they are conducting stated "availability of a final product will depend on how this proof-of-concept research progresses, which is largely dependent on the outcome of research results and regulatory approval processes. Irrespective of these factors, commercial varieties of these GM wheat and barley plants would not be available before 2015."
- On 7 July 2011, Greenpeace released a report titled '*Australia's wheat scandal*' which outlined Greenpeace belief that GM wheat was unsafe and would inevitably appear on our shelves in the near future.
- Subsequently, on 14 July 2011 Greenpeace activists broke into a CSIRO trial site in Canberra and destroyed a 0.5ha trial plot of GM wheat with whipper-snippers. The Australian Federal Police have charged two women over the incident and they are expected to face the ACT Magistrates Court.
- The department is responding to a freedom of information request from Greenpeace asking for documents the department holds pertaining to the development of drought and salinity tolerant GM wheat.
- In 2009-10 the Grains Research and Development Corporation invested \$5.3 million into GM wheat research, about 3.7 per cent of its annual budget.
- In May 2009, Australian grain grower organisations, together with their counterparts in the US and Canada, endorsed a GM wheat trilateral statement, GM wheat research and development in recognised the importance of markets, trade and consumer confidence.

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